

MAY 3, 1978

MEKONG RIVER SCHEME -- BACK ON TRACK

ANNCR:

IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE REACTIVATION OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMITTEE HOLDS OUT HOPE THAT REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS POSSIBLE THROUGH COOPERATION BETWEEN NON-COMMUNIST AND COMMUNISTS COUNTRIES. VOA'S BUI TUAN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE MEKONG RIVER COMMITTEE WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE LATE 1950'S TO SPEED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND, CAMBODIA, LAOS AND VIETNAM -- FOUR COUNTRIES THAT DEPEND HEAVILY UPON THE MEKONG RIVER AND ITS RESOURCES. HOWEVER, THE COMMITTEE WAS DISBANDED FOLLOWING THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER IN INDOCHINA IN 1975. IT'S REACTIVATION WAS UNANIMOUSLY RECOMMENDED BY LAST YEAR'S CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (ESCAP). AND, EARLIER THIS YEAR, THE COMMITTEE WAS OFFICIALLY REACTIVATED AS PART OF AN AGREEMENT CONCLUDED BY THAILAND, LAOS AND VIETNAM. ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE PROJECTS ADMINISTERED BY THE MEKONG COMMITTEE AFFECT CAMBODIA, THE PHNOM PENH GOVERNMENT HAS REFUSED TO SIGN THE AGREEMENT.

W.J. VAN DER CORD, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMITTEE SAYS THE GROUP WILL NOW GIVE ATTENTION TO THE LONG-RANGE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER AND WATER-RELATED RESOURCES OF THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN AND ITS TRIBUTARIES. THE MEKONG RIVER SCHEME WILL TAKE IN PROJECTS INVOLVING HYDROELECTRIC POWER, IRRIGATION, FLOOD CONTROL, NAVIGATION IMPROVEMENT, WATERSHED MANAGEMENT, AND POTABLE WATER SYSTEMS.

THE COMMITTEE'S FIRST MEETING WAS HELD IN FEBRUARY IN HANOI. VIETNAMESE FOREIGN MINISTER NGUYEN DUY TRINH TOLD THE DELEGATES THAT THE MEETING MARKED A NEW STEP IN STRENGTHENING RELATIONS AND COOPERATION AMONG VIETNAM, LAOS, AND THAILAND AMONG THE PROJECTS APPROVED WERE THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAMONG DAM IN THAILAND AND WATER CONSERVANCY WORKS IN THE MEKONG DELTA. THE COMMITTEE ALSO DRAFTED AN APPEAL FOR FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE WHICH IT PRESENTED TO LAST MONTH'S BANGKOK MEETING OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC.

THE MOST RECENT PROJECT COMPLETED ON THE MEKONG RIVER WAS THE FORTY MILLION DOLLAR ADDITION TO THE NAM NGUM HYDROELECTRIC STATION IN LAOS. THE STATION WILL PROVIDE ELECTRICITY FOR NORTHEASTERN THAILAND, FROM WHICH LAOS WILL COLLECT LARGE AMOUNTS OF BADLY NEEDED FOREIGN CURRENCY.

LAOTIAN SECRETARY OF STATE NOUPHAN SITPHASAI -- CHAIRMAN OF THE MEKONG COMMITTEE -- SAYS THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE WILL RECEIVE THE HIGHEST PRIORITY THIS YEAR. THE COMMITTEE IS ALSO SEEKING PLEDGES OF FIFTY MILLION DOLLARS TO FUND PROJECTS RELATING TO FISH PRODUCTION, INLAND TRANSPORTATION, AND FLEET MODERNIZATION. THE NETHERLANDS, FRANCE, IRAN, SWEDEN, JAPAN, NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIA HAVE ANNOUNCED THAT THEY WILL INCREASE THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MEKONG RIVER PROJECTS. AT THE SAME TIME, IT'S HOPED THAT CAMBODIA WILL RECONSIDER IT'S BOYCOTT OF THE MEKONG COMMITTEE.

JS/PY